

In December, my friend in Costa Rica forwarded an application blank to join the Western Writers of America. He belongs, having published several novels in the Western genre.

He omitted why he thought I should join. Perhaps he thought my resume or profile would look better if club affiliations extended farther than the 09 Trapping Club and an honorary membership in Mr. Sam's wholesale house. Also, he may think he will have to speak at my final rites. He's no dumb head at gathering copy. Has plenty of experience reviving dull subjects and pumping life into threadbare stories.

The request fell the two weeks the *Livestock Weekly* was out of print for Christmas, so finding the editor or the publisher for sponsors was difficult. Next in line was one of the retired editors, the novelist Elmer Kelton — a soft-hearted chap, but also a cautious fellow careful not to overextend his influence or lucre to bolster old scribes. (Does that make sense? Try this, please: "Mr. Kelton is a famous Western writer who remembers his old pals, but still remembers moreso his harsh beginning, living on the greasewood flat close to Crane, Texas, well enough to stay on guard for hombres inclined to ask big favors or small loans.")

The instigator in Costa Rica made a point of including that members have to have a pair of "dress boots" to wear to the meetings and conventions. However, he also omitted the fact that dues cost seventy-five bucks a year to receive the big honor.

Costa Rica must be 2000 miles from the shortgrass country. But he remembered from his youth living on the family ranch on the North Concho River, the universal ranch law proclaiming that sums extracted from a herder equal the same pain exacted on other professions transplanting skin from the temple to the kneecap. (Just not my day. Maybe tomorrow will be better.)

Dues are always a sensitive topic. The hollowhorn and woolie associations, for example, kept the membership price the same for years. One day it hit me that any outfit operating on the same revenue as 20 or 30 years ago must be skimping on the benefits, or so oblivious to inflation that any material overtures toward the worthies in Congress might be confused with the efforts of the "Save the Lincoln Penny" club. (Ethics is too hot a subject in Washington now to come right out and write "bribery" or "lobbyist.")

The dues and the costume expense hurt worse during the holidays. A brown dust cloud of gloom hung over the 09 Divide. Every north wind cast the pall of burned grass smoke from the big fire on the county line. On every dry awakening, buying a pair of canvas snakeproof tops to wear

over work shoes sounded as far from reach as the chance of trapping an ostrich to shoe a new member in a writing club, which itself ran so far out of bounds that a stock ticker couldn't quote the spread.

One day in a desperate mood, I considered selling my saddle to buy a pair of new boots to go to the conventions. Paged through the ads of the Livestock Weekly and the morning paper to check demand for old saddles. Classified advertising in the shortgrass country stirs lots of action. In the Monday edition of the Angelo daily, under "Free Pets," an ad read: "Found good cowboy hat Sunday morning off the Bryant Freeway."

Good guess, or one guess, was the advertiser probably sensed a cowboy who lost his hat on Saturday night on the freeway might be looking under the pet section for a companion on Monday morning. I'm just speculating, remembering hombres from long ago who lost new hats in Angelo from misadventures on Saturday night; they sure needed a long-haired dog to soften the chill around the home place on Sunday.

But all this became too much to assemble. In summary: Elmer Kelton wrote that boots were no longer required dress at the association meetings. I passed the "Western" part of the requirements by a big score. Qualified as being a resident of "America" after explaining that the ranch address of Crockett County Road 209 was not a housing

addition. And let's just say that the first two points struck strong enough to pass over being a "writer."

A warm feeling arises imagining my final rites. My ol' pal there all the way from Costa Rica, dressed in a black suit with soft velvet lapels, mounts the altar. Standing erect as a flag bearer, he reads: "Monte was a rancher, a member of the 09 Trapping Club for 60 years, and in later life, a member of Mr. Sam's and (pause) The Western Writer's Association of America."

And paging through my papers, descendants will find all the minutes of the 09 Trapping Club meetings, the gold card from Mr. Sam's, and every issue of The Western Writers of America magazine.